US Army Corps of Engineers®
Jacksonville District

NEWS RELEASE

Release No.: 10-20
For Release: March 26, 2010
P.O. Box 4970 Jacksonville, FL 32232-0019
Contact: Nanciann Regalado
Phone: (904) 232-3904 Cell: (904) 334-8954
Email: Nanciann.E.Regalado@usace.army.mil

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers begins pulse releases from Lake Okeechobee to both coastal estuaries

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. – The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Jacksonville District will begin a series of three 13-day pulse releases from Lake Okeechobee to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries Saturday, March 27 at 7 am.

Today, the lake stage is 14.28 feet NGVD and continues to rise. The yearly lake level recession, which traditionally takes place during the dry season, did not occur this year and water managers say it is unlikely to occur at this late date. Therefore, as lake levels rise, ecologists and engineers are concerned about the health of the lake and the condition of the Herbert Hoover Dike.

On the lake, emergent vegetation is within a few inches of being overtopped, and light penetration in some underwater vegetation beds has declined with increased water levels. Herbert Hoover Dike's condition directly correlates to the lake stage – the higher the lake, the greater potential for dike erosion, resulting in increased concern over public health and safety.

The target flow to the Caloosahatchee Estuary is an average flow over each 13-day period not to exceed 2,200 cubic feet per second (cfs), measured at W.P. Franklin Lock and Dam (S-79). The target flow to the St. Lucie Estuary is an average flow over each 13-day period not to exceed 950 cfs, measured at the St. Lucie Lock and Dam (S-80).

At 14.28 NGVD, the lake is within the Operational Band of the 2008 Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule (LORS). More specifically, the lake level is currently in the Low Sub-Band and has been since Feb. 14. Projection shows the lake level is likely to remain in this sub-band. According to the 2008 LORS, Low Sub-Band releases may be made up to 3,000 cfs and up to 1,170 cfs to the Caloosahatchee and St Lucie, respectively.

Scientists and engineers will continually monitor the conditions to help ensure releases from Lake Okeechobee are not damaging the estuaries. "We have to take a number of factors into consideration when we make releases from Lake Okeechobee, and we will continue to monitor the situation closely," said Stu Appelbaum, deputy for restoration program management. "We are particularly concerned about the effect of lowering salinities in the estuaries at this critical time of year."

The Corps is working with Lake Okeechobee and estuary scientists to increase the probability of saving emergent vegetation, while minimizing impacts to the estuaries. Submerged and aquatic vegetation might avoid negative impacts if the lake stage stabilizes or the rate of rise slows substantially.

Salinity levels in the estuaries are already low due to local rainfall and runoff, and the interagency team of scientists is watching readings closely. Input from Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuary agency scientists suggests that the estuaries can tolerate low level releases. If conditions change, they may require water management modifications such as increasing, decreasing or redistributing releases in accordance with the 2008 LORS.

Water level data and flows for Lake Okeechobee and the Central and Southern Florida Project can be found on the water management page on Jacksonville District's Web site at: http://www.saj.usace.army.mil/Divisions/Engineering/Branches/WaterResources/WaterMgt/index.htm.